

## Janice Schakowsky

1944–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

1999–



Image courtesy of the Member

**As a former consumer rights activist** and an Illinois legislator, Janice Schakowsky won the seat U.S. Representative Sidney Yates held for nearly half a century. An outspoken liberal, Congresswoman Schakowsky has focused on legislation concerning health care, childcare, and Social Security reform.

Janice Danoff was born in Chicago, Illinois, on May 26, 1944, to Irwin Danoff, a furniture salesman, and Tillie Cosnow Danoff, an elementary schoolteacher. She attended Sullivan High School in Chicago. In 1965, she graduated from the University of Illinois with a B.S. degree in elementary education and then worked for two years as a teacher. In February 1965, Janice Danoff married Harvey E. Schakowsky. The couple raised two children, but were divorced in 1980. (Later, Janice Schakowsky married Robert B. Creamer, a longtime Chicago political organizer who had one child, Lauren, from a previous marriage.) Schakowsky was a homemaker until, in 1969, she organized National Consumers United, a group that eventually succeeded in getting freshness dates placed on food products. From 1976 to 1985, Schakowsky worked as the program director for the Illinois Public Action Council, a consumer rights advocacy group whose work included preventing utilities from denying service to delinquent bill payers in the winter months.<sup>1</sup> Schakowsky then worked as the director of the Illinois State Council of Senior Citizens from 1985 to 1990. She left that post to make a successful campaign for the Illinois state general assembly, where she served until 1998, chaired the labor and commerce committee, and worked to create more day-care centers and pass tougher hate-crime laws.<sup>2</sup>

When 48-year House veteran Sidney Yates retired in 1998, Schakowsky entered the Democratic primary in the race to fill his seat representing a district north of Chicago. With funding from outside groups such as EMILY's List and intense grass-roots canvassing with 1,500 volunteers, she prevailed handily over a state senator and a hotel chain heir, emphasizing what she called "women's issues," such

as health care, education, and food labeling. “People were interested in having a woman’s voice in the House of Representatives,” she declared after the primary.<sup>3</sup> In the general election Schakowsky continued to stress the theme of big government assistance to solve social problems, including equal rights for women, minorities and gays and national health care. In the heavily Democratic district that encompasses most of Chicago’s lakefront, Schakowsky rolled past Republican candidate Herbert Sohn (her former physician) and a Libertarian candidate, compiling 75 percent of the vote. “I don’t think I can be defined as too far left in a district like this,” Schakowsky said.<sup>4</sup> She was easily re-elected in 2000 and 2002 with 76 percent and 70 percent of the vote, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

When Schakowsky took her seat in the 106th Congress (1999–2001), she received assignments on two committees: Banking and Financial Services (later renamed Financial Services) and Small Business. A few months later she was appointed to the Government Reform Committee and vacated her seat on Small Business. In the 107th Congress (2001–2003) Schakowsky became Ranking Member on the Government Reform Subcommittee on Government Efficiency, Financial Management and Intergovernmental Relations. She also served as vice chair of the House Democratic Caucus Special Committee on Election Reform and as a member of the Homeland Security Task Force.

In an era when government services were curtailed, Congresswoman Schakowsky advocated increasing federal aid to help abused children and women, developing a single-payer government health insurance system, and expanding accessible and affordable housing for persons with disabilities. She supported abortion rights and opposed the death penalty. Following a racially motivated July 4, 1999, shooting spree in her district, she authored a hate-crimes bill and redoubled her longtime advocacy of gun control. In the 107th Congress, she authored the Voting Rights Act of 2001, which guaranteed that no registered voters—including the homeless—may be turned away at the polls. She also wrote “First Things First,” a bill which sought to freeze the 2001 tax break while the country addressed deepening economic problems and key national security issues.

Schakowsky quickly impressed House leaders and, in 2001, was named Chief Deputy Democratic Whip by Minority Leader Richard Gephardt. She proved an adept fundraiser, especially among women’s issues groups. Schakowsky also emerged as a party spokesperson appearing on network political shows to articulate the Democratic Party’s position on national issues ranging from tax reform to the congressional resolution for the use of force against Iraq in 2002. In 2004, Congresswoman Schakowsky was elected to her fourth consecutive term, with 76 percent of the vote.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, “Janice D. Schakowsky,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

## NOTES

- 1 *Politics in America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 526–528.
- 2 *Politics in America*, 2002: 526–528.
- 3 LeAnn Spencer, “Schakowsky Wins 3-Way Fight to Replace Yates,” 18 March 1998, *Chicago Tribune*: N1.
- 4 “Janice D. Schakowsky,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 2000.
- 5 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.